
The Lord's Table: A Dialog

Pastors Russ Kennedy and Dale Evans

Introduction

Opening remarks about format of the morning...

Come to the Table

Russ:

What is it that we are doing at the Lord's Table?

Dale:

We are gathering as a congregation to continue in an observance that was instituted by Jesus and affirmed by the apostle Paul that is filled with symbolism to remind and teach several important Gospel truths.

Russ:

Pictures and parables seem to be an important way that God has communicated to us through the Bible. We just saw how Jesus himself used parables, which are an example of extended "picture language" to convey truth that can be heard and embraced or refused and rejected.

How does the Bible use metaphors and symbols?

Dale:

God, in his great wisdom, has communicated his Truth to us in many ways. In the opening of the Book of Hebrews it says that "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." One of those ways was in the ordering and the recording of history. Imbedded in this story telling was the use of metaphor and symbolism. The representing of a difficult concept by means of another more concrete thing or idea is found throughout the Bible, in poetic and prophetic forms but also in the retelling of history. Things that "happened" were recounted to show they have meaning that extends beyond the event itself. Our understanding of the Lord's Table is built upon this idea.

Russ:

But these symbols are not left for us to imagine or create, are they? Many times, the images are interpreted in the text for us, although there are times we are not explicitly provided the clear meaning. We can see this as we work through the meaning of the Lord's Table can't we by asking question about the text as well. Like...

What Is the occasion of the first Lord's Table?

Dale:

Let's use the account of this event recorded by Luke in his gospel, chapter 22 beginning in verse 7:

Then came the day of Unleavened Bread, on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. So Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat it." They said to him, "Where will you have us prepare it?" He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." And they went and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover.

And when the hour came, he reclined at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves. For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."

At the end of Jesus' public ministry he gathered with his disciples, it seems from the parallel accounts in Matthew and Mark's gospels that this was just with "the twelve", to participate in the Passover. This was indeed his last Passover that he celebrated with them.

Russ:

So just before Jesus was crucified, he was able to observe this great Jewish ceremony with his disciples but this time with more poignancy and pregnant with meaning. This celebration was one of the highlights of the Jewish religious calendar wasn't it? Perhaps we should briefly remind the congregation of its origin and meaning.

What was the "Passover" meal about?

Dale:

We first read about it in the retelling of the original event in Exodus chapter 12. There we read:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, "This month shall be for you the beginning of months. It shall be the first month of the year for you. Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month every man shall take a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for a lamb, then he and his nearest neighbor shall take according to the number of persons; according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb. Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old. You may take it from the sheep or from the goats, and you shall keep it until the

fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted on the fire; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it. Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted, its head with its legs and its inner parts. And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn. In this manner you shall eat it: with your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the LORD’s Passover. For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt.

It was reiterated several times in the opening books of the Scriptures to remind them of God’s work and initiative in their release from bondage and their constitution as God’s people, their identity and direction.

Russ:

So, the Passover celebrated God’s deliverance as a community and as individuals and they were to celebrate it annually. As you said, it gave the Israelites a distinctive identity and purpose. It was a memorial and a visual aid to remind them of God’s plan, power and provision both in the past and in their current situations. And yet Jesus takes this symbol and uses its symbolism to point to something further and more real doesn’t he? What he teaches with this creation of a new memorial seems bigger than before. So...

Why is this ordinance important?

Dale:

As you said, Jesus is teaching us not only about this particular symbol, but about how to read and interpret the whole of the Old Testament and the story of the nation of Israel in particular. We remember the specifics in this event but we need to stand back and see how it all goes together some times.

Russ:

Yes, Jesus turns this central event in the history and then worship of Israel and fulfills it. This is exciting when we realize how Jesus comes to bring to a close an era of God’s working and then opens up an entirely new chapter of work. It is not a completely disconnected plan but extends and demonstrates that most of the events and literature of what we refer to as the Old Testament is metaphor and symbol to what Jesus comes to say and do both in his life and yet in the future.

What did Jesus do to re-orient the Passover and then institute the Lord’s Table?

Dale:

Let's go back to Luke 22. After the main meal, he then took two main elements and used them to picture himself and his work. In verse 19 and 20 we read:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

He provides the interpretation of the symbol and announces even more completely to the original disciples what the next indeed last hours of his earthly life mean for them.

Russ:

So as the apostle Paul interprets this event and uses it as an example where the church in

Corinth has gone off the rails, he calls them as a church to observe this doesn't he?

Who is invited to participate?

Dale:

Yes, this is a community event, not a private gathering. You know even in Amos, we are called God's people, not God's persons. There is a real and fundamental difference there. Indeed, our faith in the work of the gospel is an individual commitment. It is not something that happens because we belong to a certain family, culture, race or nationality. We individually are called to believe. But then we are made part of a new family that transcends our old attachments. It is bigger than family, culture, race or nationality. We belong together and to one another. That is why Paul states it this way to the Corinthians in chapter 11 verses 17-22:

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

Russ:

That is why we emphasize another rather small part of the picture as well isn't it?

Why do we wait for all to receive the elements and then partake together?

Dale:

Yes, later in verse 33 and following we read:

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another – if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

Russ:

So that brings us to another element of this discussion. We often have been taught to approach the table in a certain way or with a certain attitude haven't we? I think this is because Paul is chastising the Corinthians for their bad behavior.

How are the elements to be received and participated in?

How is this both a time of solemnity and celebration?

Dale:

There is a sense that we should be humbled and awed as we approach the Lord's Table. Our abject unworthiness to fellowship with the Lord of Glory and to remember His initiative to procure and secure our forgiveness and acceptance should be overwhelming. Our familiarity with this sometimes hardens us to the power and grace this symbol suggests. But we often let this slide into a grieving event, don't we?

Russ:

This, for Christians, is a time of celebration of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done for us. This should encourage us to live because of His gift of the Holy Spirit to empower us. This is exciting because it represents the new life that the New Covenant promises and indeed provides. Yes, solemnity, because it is an act beyond our complete human comprehension, but celebratory because we are now welcome as co-heirs in the new kingdom of Jesus the Son!

Dale:

So, the real concern about partaking unworthily is whether we truly believe or not. We are all utterly unworthy. The principal question is whether we are trusting completely in this sacrifice of our Lord that these elements will picture. Our self-reflection should be whether our lives are growing and changing to match that of those who are true disciples of our Savior. Do we believe in the power of the cross and message of the gospel and that alone?

Take the Bread

Russ:

So, Dale, why don't you then remind us about the meaning of the bread in this ceremony, exactly

What does the bread symbolize?

Dale:

In Luke 22 verse 19 we read Jesus' statement:

And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

The bread that he lifted from the table represented his body. The natural, visible existence that that witnessed in front of them. The person they lived, learned and ministered with for the past three or so years. And they would have easily seen this as another of Jesus powerful object lessons.

Russ:

So, the text also says more doesn't it:

What does this symbol mean?

Dale:

It calls us to remember Jesus was here in the flesh, he was a real man. He was son of Adam, son of Abraham. And yet he was God with us. God as one of us. He came from heaven and took on flesh.

Russ:

So the picture goes on to more than that as well?

Why then was the bread broken?

What does this symbolism add to the meaning?"

Dale:

The brokenness symbolizes the death that was to occur. Not by "natural causes" but a violent death. We often lose that element of symbolism in the way we distribute the elements to the larger group of people don't we? But there is still more to Jesus words.

Why do we remember and reflect on the bread?

Why did Jesus say it was "for you"?

Russ:

Indeed, the violent death was for us, on our behalf, for our benefit. It was a substitute for our death and punishment. It was for our sins, not his own. We then eat it, take it

in. We cannot merely look at the sacrifice of Christ, we don't simply remember this event, we embrace it, believe it and commit our allegiance to it.

Take the wafer, then, and reflect this is picturing Jesus body, real humanity to pay the penalty for our human sins. Dale, give thanks for this bread.

Dale:

Prayer

Russ:

Take, eat.

Take the Cup

Dale:

So, Russ, can you then remind us about the symbol of the cup?

What does the cup symbolize?

Russ:

The cup contained wine, a red liquid. It looks a bit like blood. It was meant to symbolize the life that was carried by blood. If the blood isn't flowing through the body, the body is dead. Blood then means life.

Dale:

But there is more here with the Passover and sacrifice as well isn't there?

What does this symbol mean?

Russ:

In Exodus 24 Moses does an interesting thing with the blood of sacrifice to ratify that covenant between God and the people. Reading from verse 3 through verse 8.

Moses came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do." And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words."

He took the blood and splashed it on the people! The life of the sacrifice was not thrown upon them. The power of that covenant was now living in them because the blood was cast/sprinkled on them.

Dale:

So then back to Luke then he says this:

And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying,
“Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out
for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Why does Jesus say it was “poured out”?

What does this symbolism add to the meaning?

Russ:

For one it pays the deserved penalty of our sins. It accomplishes the actual forgiveness not just anticipating the forgiveness of sin. But more than that, the life of Jesus is now extended to us. Just as with baptism we affirm a “new resurrection life” in the Lord’s table his sacrifice for sin gives us life as well.

Dale:

But it is not just a provision that makes possible the forgiveness of sins, is it? It is much more direct and powerful.

Why do we remember and reflect on the cup?

Why did Jesus say it was “for you”?

Russ:

Christ’s death is intentional for those God chose from eternity past. It is not just potential, but is actual – that is, it actually provides all that is needed for each one God intended it.

Dale:

Carefully open the small cup now. It is grape juice, red like blood, picturing the life-giving blood of our Lord. Russ, could you give thanks for the cup?

Russ:

Pray

Dale:

All, Drink.

Leaving the Table:

Dale:

We will now reflect further on this in our music, but Russ, while the musicians are coming, a couple of more thoughts are pertinent.

How does this inaugurate a “new covenant”?

What was promised with the coming of the New Covenant?

Russ:

Just as Moses inaugurated the old covenant in blood, Jesus says this is the New Covenant now. The New Covenant is begun with outpoured life of the Lord. One of the promises of the New Covenant is the gift of the Spirit. So the Holy Spirit poured out into our lives enables us to live out the covenant life.

So, then Dale to close...

How does the power of the Spirit affect our lives now? How do we leave then today?

Dale:

As we leave, we should be encouraged that we have a greater relationship now. Peter’s next event was foretold as they left the supper, that he would deny him. As the New Covenant became a reality in time, the spirit came and in our regeneration the spirit lives in us and now through us. We grow, change, live, worship and share the message of the gospel in the power of the spirit because of the life and death of Christ.

Together:

This we do, in remembrance of him!

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